

In light of a night devoted to gabber and hardcore at CTM 2018, scholar and former electronic music producer Hillegonda C. Rietveld reflects on a genre that evolved in her home city in The Netherlands, spread throughout the world in the 1990s, and is now experiencing a rebirth via millennial-generation parties seeking to re-infuse the music scene with a spirit of anti-elitism and the aesthetics of horror.

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Gabber Overdrive – Noise, Horror, and Acceleration

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New York, 1992: DJ Repeat plays the hardest sounds he can lay his hands on: tekno from Berlin, hardhouse from Frankfurt, gabber house from Rotterdam, hardcore from Belgium; each a mixture of European avant-garde, post-punk, electronic dance music, Euro-disco, and house music. DJ Repeat is placed high up in a church-building-turned-nightclub, The Limelight, which caters mostly to young “Italian” and “Anglo” suburban dancers from Brooklyn and New Jersey – “bridge and tunnel” folk. His energetic set is a juggling act of flow and rupture, rewinding the already fragmented tracks by spinning the vinyl records backwards at breakneck speed and mixing in seemingly random noises like festive confetti. An MC whips up the crowd New York-style, with demonic shouts. The dancers, though, seem to be aimlessly milling around as the music is too fast to lock into a groove in a sustained manner. Instead, they occasionally wave their arms in the air, while the go-go girls sit seemingly bored, or tired, with dangling legs in their suspended cages.

Seemingly oblivious to the dancefloor, DJ Repeat is immersed in the sonic mayhem of brutal beats and piercing sawtooth waveforms. He enthusiastically turns around amidst the noisy turmoil and shouts over his shoulder that he aims to recreate the atmosphere of the Paradise Garage, the legendary dance club that in 1987 had returned to its former function as parking garage. For anyone who had set foot in the Garage, this was a puzzling notion – the size of its dance floor was comparable to that of The Limelight, but catered to an African-American gay crowd, which would dance all night long to an eclectic mix of soul, disco, funk, and electronica. The Garage was about love: love of music, love of the community, and love of a hi-fidelity sound: offering an astounding soundsystem, you could have a conversation without shouting, yet the bass would bounce and stroke your body. With Larry Levan as its resident DJ, who lived for a well-balanced sound and who communicated his

messages through vocal music selections, the club acted as a catalyst of a musical aesthetic known in the UK as “garage.” A melodic, soulful, and perhaps even melancholic type of dance music that mixed acoustic with electronic sounds, it seemed to me a universe away from the accelerated, extreme noise fest of gabber and hardcore.

While I’m reflecting on this, DJ Repeat spins in a hardcore track. To my astonishment, I recognise the staccato melody that is stabbed aggressively in piercing tones, based on a football song from my hometown Rotterdam. Soccer fandom is not something that I would associate with this particular New York crowd, or with Paradise Garage, for that matter. At around 140 BPM, “Feyenoord Reactivate” by Rotterdam Termination Source (1992, Rotterdam Records) has a relatively fast tempo for its time, its low-frequency breakbeats rolling like a storming tank on the battlefield. As with other hardcore tracks, the musical structures are ruptured, the grooves broken up with occasional rewind sounds that recall hip-hop turntablism.

In 1992, Rotterdam was the epicentre of a radical hardcore dance music, known as “gabberhouse” (simplified to the dada-esque nomer “gabba” for English speakers). “Gabber” is a Dutch Yiddish term meaning “geezer” or “mate,” and was used in a derogatory manner by Amsterdam rival house music fans to refer to Rotterdam hardcore producers and dancers, who were mostly working-class and male. The term was adopted and accepted as a badge of honour, confirming a subcultural identity. The guys were recognisable by their shaven skinheads, and the girls by their half-shaven hairstyle.

The Amsterdam-Rotterdam rivalry stems from premier league football, Feyenoord for Rotterdam versus Ajax for Amsterdam. This is illustrated by the first identifiable gabber track, “Amsterdam, Waar Lech Dat Dan” (1992, Rotterdam Records), produced by Paul Elstak, the man behind Rotterdam Records, as Euromasters; the record sleeve unashamedly shows a cartoon of the iconic Rotterdam Euromast (a viewing tower near the river Maas, with a restaurant at the top) urinating on Amsterdam. The prolific success of gabber in Rotterdam may have partly been stimulated by a stronger leniency by the local authorities towards “house parties” (as raves were called in the Netherlands) when compared to elsewhere in the country, while the genre also gained popularity in the legal club environment. For example, according to Paul Elstak, the venue Parkzicht attracted many working-class punters who worked in the huge international harbour of Rotterdam. It was there that, in 1992, *Nightmare in the Park* took place in reference to the 1984 horror movie *A Nightmare*

on *Elm Street*. This was followed by *Nightmare in Rotterdam*, the start of a long-lasting set of parties in the sports hall Energiehal that eventually moved into the sports arena Ahoy. The biggest dance event of that year, *Eurorave*, was held on the beach near the gigantic petrochemical industrial estates of the Europoort, attracting 20,000 gabber and techno fans.

Gabber not only features British rave-inspired breakbeats, but also tracks that are based on four-to-the-floor, on-the-pulse Teutonic bass-drum beats that pound like a pile driver, a reminder of the soundscape of a city being rebuilt after its partial destruction during WWII. An iconic example is Sperminator's "No Women Allowed" (1992, Rotterdam Records) with its horror movie sound bites and music samples – a track that, with its brazen "no women" sample, was re-appropriated by the leather lesbian scene at London's queer Soho club *Fist*. A role model for such production values and sonic textures can be found in the German proto-gabber of "We Have Arrived" (1990) by Mescalinum United (Marc Acardipane a.k.a. Marc Trauner), who will be performing during CTM's "Turmoil" edition of 2018. The drum sounds in such gabber productions are mostly generated by the archetypal Roland TR-909 Rhythm Composer (a type of drum machine), which can also be heard in Chicago house music and Detroit techno, important components in the genealogy of hardcore techno. The characteristic swirling, multi-tracked, and piercing low-resolution "hoover" synth noise seems to be derived from (or seems to emulate) an 8-bit Atari video gaming home computer, illustrating an inescapable resonance between the gabber scene and game culture.

All of this is packaged in what seems a blank semiotic space, a seemingly amorphous noise that can be simultaneously contextualised as ironic and not ironic, and with a rockist dislike of "disco," despite its rhizomatic links, as illustrated by DJ Repeat's reference to Paradise Garage in the above anecdote. However, hardcore's dance beats also stem from industrial dance and electronic body music (EBM), which, as S. Alexander Reed explains in his book *Assimilate*, gained its four-to-the floor beats during the 1980s with the adoption of drum machines, creating a danceable frame for industrial noise music that is very similar to a disco rhythm.¹ For example, listen to the Belgian punk-vocalised proto-techno of "Body to Body" by Front 242 (Red Rhino Europe, 1981) or the banging beats of "Der Mussolini" (Virgin, 1981) by the early-80s electro-punk of DAF (Deutsch Amerikanische Freundschaft). Industrial is characterised by a machine aesthetic that foregrounds noise. Similarly, gabber

¹ Reed, S. Alexander. *Assimilate: A Critical History of Industrial Music*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

overdrives the volume of its already shrieking and punching sound palette to extremes, producing an immersive experience of excess, in this case of rage and violence. Noise is a tricky thing to theorise, however. It can be regarded as an unwelcome interference, and as “anti-music,” this would reconfirm what “proper” music should be about, and thereby fails to deliver a new way of hearing. Still, is noise so embryonic that, from its state of chaos, it may be morphed into a range of political directions? A critical praxis may be found in hardcore gabber for its simultaneously numbing effect and immanent revolutionary potential. At CTM 2018, New York’s Kilbourne “uses ‘terrifying,’ ‘aggro-fem’ slammers with titles like ‘Witch Hunt’ and ‘Men:Parasites’ to reconnoitre and exorcise the haunted territories of trauma.”² Simultaneously, this demonstrates that violent noise is not exclusive to male producers: women and non-binary producers are also increasingly involved in making electronic noise.

Extreme noise initiates a balancing act between repulsion and sublime. Similarly, gabber displays a violent sense of masochism through an embrace of horror imagery, illustrated by the flyer image of the well-known pale, pinned face from the 1987 movie *Hellraiser*. Can you stand the pain? Can you handle the noise, the terror, the nightmare? Here one can turn to a similar attitude in heavy metal. Rather than dismissing this as an empty nihilism, Robert Walser explains in *Running with the Devil* that horror appeared as a counter to the rationality of the enlightenment, and coincides with “periods of social strain and disorder”³ – of turmoil, in other words. Horror, pain, and terror enable intense physical and mental experiences that can play an important role in the adolescent rite of passage, while the resultant adrenaline rush may produce a raw sense of excited pleasure. Perfect for an industrial rave populated by young, working-class dancers, then. During the early 1990s a chasm appeared between fast financial capital and a slowing economy, producing a gap between ambition and reality. In this context, horror became a way to channel the resultant sense of rage, which may be experienced within the contradictions of subordination. Furthermore, the irrationality of horror may well highlight “the dark side of the capitalist security state,”⁴ turning what seems like a mindless night out into a type of avant-garde act. This is where the more left-wing anarcho-squatter scene inserts itself into the music, such as the regular hardcore/gabber *Death Till Dawn*

² CTM Festival, “CTM 2018 – 2nd Announcement.” <http://www.ctm-festival.de/festival-2018/welcome/ctm-2018-2nd-announcement/>

³ Robert Walser (1993) *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*. Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, p. 161.

⁴ *Ibid.*: 162.

parties in Brixton, London, taking some of the more reactionary voice samples with a sense of irony.

Acceleration is equally central to gabber. Although the economy may be slowing down, simultaneously financial capitalism accelerates. In the UK, the philosophical group CCRU developed what Benjamin Noys identifies in his book *Malign Velocities*⁵ as “accelerationism.” Partly inspired by the sped-up breakbeats in hardcore rave and jungle, the idea was to beat capitalism by being faster than capitalism – an impossible task, as biological rhythms of the organic human body are incompatible with digital capitalism. Yet computer game culture and raves seem to attempt just that: go faster, accelerate, take more pills, and don’t sleep – speed on an amphetamine buzz instead. Not depending on a human drummer, the drum machine clock can be set faster and faster, to 170 BPM, 200 BPM, and beyond, towards speedcore, an undanceable gabber subgenre that turns music into a drone as the pulse accelerates to a speed of 1000 BPM: Can you handle the stress, this endurance? In an article on accelerationism for *The Guardian*,⁶ Andy Beckett cites Steve Goodman, a philosopher and the owner of electronic music label Hyperdub: “We all live in an operating system set up by the accelerating triad of war, capitalism and emergent AI.” And, extending this logic, we are either swept along or, reversely, as was the case with dubstep during the first decade of the new millennium, stopped in our tracks in a tragic state of inertia. Fast forward to 2018, though, and CTM hosts Stockholm’s HAJ300, who founded the female electronic music collective Drömfakulteten (Dream Faculty) and recently released the 200-bpm “Varfor sa du inget” (‘Why Didn’t You Say Anything?’), an example of noisy overdrive that “us[es] tempo and speed as the lens and tool through which to look at material desires and failures, post-industrial economies and workaday workings in a Full Geography.”⁷

Music and its experience are articulated and shaped within specific social and economic contexts. In addition, Attali argues in his monograph *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*⁸ that noise can be prophetic. The political ambiguity of noise and horror means that gabber may be understood from a range of perspectives and

⁵ Noys, Benjamin. *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism*. Winchester and Washington D.C.: Zero Books, 2014.

⁶ Beckett, Andy. “Accelerationism: how a fringe philosophy predicted the future we live in.” *The Guardian*, May 11, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/11/accelerationism-how-a-fringe-philosophy-predicted-the-future-we-live-in>

⁷ CTM Festival. “CTM 2018 – 2nd Announcement.” <http://www.ctm-festival.de/festival-2018/welcome/ctm-2018-2nd-announcement/>

⁸ Attali, Jaques. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (translator: Brian Massumi). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

interpreted as either amorphous rage, nihilist destruction, or revolutionary, avant-garde anarchism. The embracing of acceleration heralded the arrival of post-human subjectivity, which was initially mixed with a disturbing populist demagoguery. So, was gabberhouse, perhaps, a prophecy of an emerging alt-right? Or will CTM 2018's offering of gabber and hardcore prove such a thesis wrong? Offering space for marginalised anger and turmoil in overdrive, the immersive, repetitive whirlwind of accelerated noise and abject horror acts as an unspoken, yet extremely loud, sonic critique that must be experienced.

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HIGHLIGHT QUOTES

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